The influence of provocateurs' emotion displays on the social information processing of children varying in social adjustment and age

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of provocateurs' emotion displays on first through fourth graders' social information processing (SIP). Rating and nomination sociometric techniques were used to identify rejected–aggressive, rejected–nonaggressive, average–nonaggressive, and popular–nonaggressive groups. Children viewed videotaped ambiguous provocation situations in which provocateurs' emotion displays were varied systematically. After each vignette, children's recall of story details, attribution of intent, and problem-solving responses were obtained. Half of the children were randomly assigned to a condition where they were asked directly about provocateurs' emotions, and the remaining children were not asked about provocateurs' feelings. Results revealed both developmental and social adjustment differences in SIP. In addition, provocateurs' emotion displays and asking versus not asking about those displays influenced multiple aspects of SIP.
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Introduction

According to functionalist theories, emotions contribute to the regulation of interpersonal encounters (e.g., Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998). Others' emotion expressions provide information about motives and intentions, and these cues also influence reactions in the observer. Although emotion display rules (Saarni, 1999) affect the utility of these cues somewhat, there is evidence indicating that sensitivity to emotion contributes to adaptive social behavior (e.g., Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; Garner, 1996; Hubbard & Coie, 1994; Mostow, Izard, Fine, & Trentacosta, 2002; Vosk, Forehand, & Figueroa, 1983; Walden & Field, 1990). Children with disruptive behavior problems have deficits in the detection of emotion cues, in the situationally appropriate expression of emotion (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Arsenio & Lover, 1997; Casey, 1996; Casey & Schlosser, 1994), in empathy (e.g., Cohen & Strayer, 1996), and in knowledge about the situational determinants of emotion (e.g., Arsenio & Fleiss, 1996; Cook, Greenberg, & Kusche, 1994). Also, effective regulation of emotion has been linked to social competence both concurrently and longitudinally (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1995).

Social information processing (SIP) models have made a valuable contribution to the understanding of social competence by accounting for the online processes that contribute to socially competent and incompetent responding. Such models assert that socially competent behavior is based on the ability to process social cues and use this information, along with accumulated social knowledge, to make social decisions. Emotion has been hypothesized to play a role in this process, but very little research has addressed this issue (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Lochman, 1985; Lochman, Burch, Curry, & Lampron, 1984). Lemerise and Arsenio (2000) suggested that SIP could be influenced by a number of different kinds of emotion processes, ranging from briefly experienced feelings to more enduring moods or affective styles. For example, SIP may lead to the experience of an emotion (e.g., "I realize my classmate has pushed me down on purpose, so I am angry or sad") that influences subsequent processing (Graham, Hudley, & Williams, 1992). It is also possible that preexisting moods and temperament-based emotional styles may influence how social cues are encoded and interpreted as well as subsequent stages of SIP. Lemerise and Arsenio (2000) hypothesized that individual differences in emotionality and the capacity to regulate emotions (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992) may underlie many of the SIP differences that have been reported for children who vary in social adjustment (see Crick & Dodge, 1994; and the following section). Moreover, given that the capacity to regulate emotion improves with development (Denham, 1998), the influence of emotion-related variables on SIP may also vary with developmental level. Following the functionalist argument that emotion performs both interpsychological and intrapsychological functions in regulating social interaction, Lemerise and Arsenio (2000) also argued that both emotion processes and cues within the individual and emotion cues expressed by others can influence encoding and interpretation of social cues as well as goals for the encounter, the evaluation of potential responses, and the problem-solving response chosen.